

STRANGE DOINGS AT "ANIMAL FARM"

A Case Study in Cultural Hocus-Pocus: New York 1954-55

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PUBLISHED in 1946, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* remains to this day, in my opinion, the best of anti-Communist books. If we had to do without all the others, fine as some of them are—Koestler, Dallin, Silone, Borkenau, Serge, and the rest—and were left with Orwell alone, we could still get by. For no other writer has shown us so clearly the worst tragedy of our age, worse in one respect at least than the crimes of the Nazis, for the Soviet tyranny combines with its terror the utter perversion of man's highest ideals.

The story is a detailed parallel with the Russian Revolution and its aftermath, from 1917 to 1945. The drunken farmer Jones flees from his mistreated and aroused animals, who, following the teachings of the late boar Major, set up an egalitarian commonwealth and attempt to run the farm by and for themselves. Few of them, unfortunately, are intelligent enough to do anything but heavy labor, and the direction of things gradually devolves upon the pigs, who lead a successful defense against Jones's armed intervention. A struggle for power develops between the two leading pigs, Napoleon (Stalin) and Snowball (Trotsky). Napoleon, by means of his Chekist (GPU, NKVD, MVD) dogs, exiles Snowball, seizes abso-

GEORGE Orwell's famous satire on Russian Communism, *Animal Farm*, has recently been brought to the screen as a full-length animated cartoon. In the peculiarly guarded manner with which the film has been advertised and reviewed, SPENCER BROWN discovers a fable for our time almost as cogent as the story of *Animal Farm* itself. Mr. Brown teaches English literature at the Fieldston School in New York City and has been a frequent contributor to our pages, most recently with his article "Late Autumn of the 'Liberal Drama'" in the December issue.

lute power, and sets about building a windmill (the Dnieper Dam, symbol of Russia's industrialization) originally planned by Snowball.

The hardest work is done by the horse Boxer, who represents the long suffering, toiling, loyal Russian people. Because of faulty construction, the windmill collapses and, when rebuilt, is again destroyed by a neighboring farmer, Frederick (Hitler), who attacks Animal Farm shortly after swindling Napoleon in a timber deal. Frederick's men are at last routed, at terrible cost. Wounded in the war but still working to rebuild the mill, the superannuated Boxer is sent to the knacker's to be boiled down for glue. Napoleon has by this time revised all the egalitarian principles of Animalism, originally enunciated by Major and codified by Snowball, to read: "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others." Having assumed human vices, Napoleon gives a banquet for another neighbor, Pilkington (the English ruling classes), at which they drink each other's health colossally and cheat each other in a card game. The bewildered animal slaves, watching from outside the windows, can no longer tell which is man and which is pig.

THE parallels with the Russian Revolution are three and four to the page. Indeed, some critics wholly friendly to Orwell and his anti-Communism find this plain, point-by-point historical correspondence an artistic defect. I cannot agree. I find *Animal Farm* a *tour de force*, but one of such extraordinary ease and realism in every phrase and incident that it is a masterpiece apart from the satire, and also a masterpiece of satire in which moral purity and breadth of human sympathy are combined with crushing wit.

At the center of *Animal Farm* is Orwell's sadness, and our sadness, as the hope of our century transforms itself before our eyes into total evil:

Never had the farm—and with a kind of surprise they remembered that it was their own farm, every inch of it their own property—appeared to the animals so desirable a place. As Clover looked down the hillside her eyes filled with tears. If she could have spoken her thoughts, it would have been to say that this was not what they had aimed at when they set themselves years ago to work for the overthrow of the human race. These scenes of terror and slaughter were not what they had looked forward to on that night when old Major first stirred them to rebellion. If she herself had had any picture of the future, it had been of a society of animals set free from hunger and the whip, all equal, each working according to his capacity, the strong protecting the weak, as she had protected the lost brood of ducklings with her foreleg on the night of Major's speech. Instead—she did not know why—they had come to a time when no one dared speak his mind, when fierce, growling dogs roamed everywhere, and when you had to watch your comrades torn to pieces after confessing shocking crimes.

This is George Orwell at his best, and our century at its best. Being unable to make a wreath of my own, I lay his wreath on his grave.

Now *Animal Farm* has been made into a full-length cartoon film by the English husband-and-wife team of John Halas and Joy Batchelor. Released by Louis de Rochemont Associates, it opened at the Paris Theater in New York on December 29. And thereby hangs more of a tale than the hopes and disappointments of animals.

Much of the satire of Orwell's novel—or for that matter of such similar works as *Gulliver's Travels* and *Penguin Island*—must remain inaccessible to this or any film. The wry, laconic understatement, the backlash of wit, can be selected from but not rendered entire, for the pace of the motion picture is incomparably slower than that of prose fiction. Nevertheless the film has many merits, stemming chiefly from Orwell's ingenuity in incident and his marvelous knack of securing

the suspension of disbelief by sympathetic and detailed realism.

It has certain defects, too, worst among which is the animators' revision of the ending: the sorrow of Orwell's animals is unrelieved, intensified finally by the realization that their revolution and suffering have been in vain, that their pig-exploiters are no different, even in appearance, from Mr. Pilkington. In the Halas-Batchelor film, however, it is not human exploiters who attend Napoleon's orgy, but other pig-bureaucrats from pig satrapies elsewhere. They all get drunk, the animals of the world unite in revolt and converge on Animal Farm, Napoleon whistles to his dogs for help, but they too are sodden in liquor and unable to prevent the overthrow of the tyrant. 'Tis the final conflict—a truly Trotskyite touch, but notably out of keeping with Orwell's melancholy view of world politics.

Another detail that might be objected to is the excessive prettying up of the animals' toil. When they are getting in the harvest and when Boxer prances as he pulls stone for the windmill, one almost expects the Seven Dwarfs to pop round the barn, singing "Hi-Ho" and pitching in with right good will. The temptation to Disneyize must have been irresistible, but Disney is not Orwell.

Yet with these and other flaws the film has not seriously damaged Orwell and may have the merit of bringing his satire to those who do not know the novel. In the promotion of the film, however, and in the response of the critics, something happened that is worthy of note.

WHAT, according to critics and advertisers, is Orwell's anti-Communist classic *Animal Farm*?

It is, says Bosley Crowther in the *New York Times*, "a pretty brutal demonstration of the vicious cycle of tyranny"; it presents "the leaders of the new Power State as pigs" and conveys "a sense of the monstrous hypocrisy of the totalitarian leader type." In a lengthy review, Mr. Crowther never comes closer than this to mentioning Russia.

It is, says Otis L. Guernsey, Jr., in the *Herald Tribune*, "a political parable satirizing the various isms in a story about animals taking over a farm and founding their own society. . . . It tells how an animals' revolution is converted into a pigs' Fascism with the passage of time and the corruption of democratic ideals."

"The main point about *Animal Farm*," says Archer Winsten in the *New York Post*, "is that it has something to say about dictatorships, democracy, and the conflicts between those who toil and those who rule. It says this without pulling punches." It is "intelligence week" at the Paris Theater, says Mr. Winsten, providing "egghead ecstasy." For the program also includes an old March of Time on Huey Long and is "of extraordinary, inter-related quality."

JOHN McCARTEN, of the *New Yorker*: "Orwell's allegory, you remember, recounts the story of a revolution in barnyard terms and dwells on the subsequent disillusionment it causes its makers, with pigs playing the roles of the totalitarian leaders who take over when a power vacuum occurs. . . . The picture has the merit of discussing an important theme in terms that are clear, direct, and easily understood."

Arthur Knight, in the *Saturday Review*: "Orwell intended *Animal Farm* as a grim parable on the rise of the modern totalitarian state. . . . The whole point of his book was that the parallels be apparent, its characters and types be recognized. . . . But the entire film gives a sense of being too closely tied to its source—while lacking the urbane and keen cutting edge of Orwell's prose." But Mr. Knight does not suggest what the parallels are, nor does he mention Russia.

Even in the *Daily News*, where one might expect something else, Wanda Hale writes, truly but vaguely: "Like Orwell's fable, the film is a vitriolic satire on dictatorship, uncomfortably realistic in the comparison of man to the lower form of animal and a frightening example of the oppressed masses under tyrannical rulers drunk with power." She does not mention Russia.

In the *Herald Tribune's* advance story on the making of the film, we learn that "In *Animal Farm* Orwell was satirizing the Dictator State in terms of Animals vs. Man. . . . The parable follows close to the history of twentieth-century totalitarianism."

As late as January 16, Mr. Crowther wrote in the *Sunday Times*: "These two highly facile young artists have converted the Orwell parody of a totalitarian political system into a clever and sardonic cartoon that is touched with bits of tearful pathos and barbed with trenchant points of caricature. . . ."

Still no word about Russia.

THE promotion of the film had been in the same general vein. In a publicity hand-out before the opening, Irving Drutman, of Louis de Rochemont Associates, says: "Orwell's world-renowned satirical fable, which lampoons the modern Power State, deals with the revolt against the tyrannical Farmer Brown [sic]. . . . The parable ironically parallels the history of the 20th century."

Another kind of promotion of the film is Roger Manvell's book *The Animated Film* (Sylvan Press, 1954), which deals with the technical problems of making *Animal Farm*. In such a book one does not expect political discussion, but Mr. Manvell goes out of his way to show how Orwell's novel presents special difficulties. In his introduction he calls it a "memorable fable" and a "serious political satire." Later he says, "George Orwell's fable is symbolic, like Swift's story in which Lemuel Gulliver travels to the land of the Horses, and the result is a political satire full of deep feeling. The animals on an ill-kept farm revolt against its cruel and drunken owner, drive him out by means of an organized revolution, and set up their own form of democratic community, led by the pigs, who prove to be the most intelligent of the animals. But although they begin with a democracy, it gradually develops into a dictatorship in which the pigs are the herrenvolk, and Napoleon, the most powerful and evil of the pigs, is the dictator." The word *Herrenvolk*, unless Dr. Manvell is just

showing off his German, can mean only the Nazis.*

In the pictorial advertising, still other intimations appeared. The placards outside the Paris Theater tell us that the film is the story of the pig Napoleon. "Is he someone you know? Someone you've read about? Seen him before? Do you recognize him?" The pictures accompanying these questions (and similar pictures appearing in newspaper advertising), though piglike enough, are also reminiscent. One pig wearing a string-tie is a caricature of a Southern Senator. Another resembles the late Hermann Goering; but this is almost inevitable—just as all babies are said to resemble Sir Winston Churchill, so all pigs resemble either Goering or Georgi Malenkov.

A third picture of a pig, which appeared

in the most prominent spot in the early newspaper advertising for the film, undeniably suggests Senator McCarthy; this is another natural—the artist can hardly be blamed for the appearance of the pigs. Still, do pigs normally look as if they suffered from five-o'clock shadow?

Also, pigs do not have bushy eyebrows. And in a new edition of *Animal Farm*, which Harcourt, Brace has brought out with drawings from the film and others which Mr. Halas and Miss Batchelor have added to illustrate passages not translated to the screen, there appears (p. 80) a drawing of Napoleon with the telltale bushy eyebrows and scowl of the same Senator McCarthy. (To give the Halases due credit, the last pig in the book does have a Stalinist mustache, but he looks like J. P. Morgan.)

*Let's try our hand at this kind of reading of *Animal Farm*. Despite a certain freedom with facts, and despite a more lenient judgment of the character of Hitler than I feel historians will ultimately concede, I think my reinterpretation of *Animal Farm* should prove acceptable to the critics of the *Times*, the *Herald Tribune*, and the *Post*, and to the de Rochemont Associates and Dr. Manvell:

Under the Weimar Tyranny of autocratic, corrupt Wilhelm II, the old socialist philosopher Richard Wagner, now dying, made his last speech to a congress of workers and peasants, predicting the revolution in the distant future and exhorting his followers to be true to their ideals of freedom and equality and justice to minorities after their victory. After Wagner's death, the revolution came unexpectedly soon, the Weimar Tyranny crumbling from sheer incompetence. When Wilhelm fled, his power was seized by Adolf Hitler, scholar, theoretician, and orator, and Hermann Goering, "not much of a talker, but with a reputation for getting his own way." These at once set up a socialist state whose egalitarian and pacifist principles, foreshadowed in the writings of Wagner and codified by Hitler, became the envy and admiration of all downtrodden peoples. In the midst of its struggles with the task of mechanizing the primitive German economy, the new state was attacked by Wilhelm, who had raised a motley army in France and England. But the intervention was quickly defeated: Hitler personally led the charge in the victorious battle and emerged as the great national hero.

In illiterate Germany, only a small minority, the Nazis, had any technical skill, and their party, willingly granted leadership by all democratic forces, was split into the Hitler and Goering factions. Hitler spoke for rapid industrialization,

though conceding that its immediate privations would be heavy. Goering, more adept and more unscrupulous, ridiculed industrialization, succeeded in forcibly driving Hitler into exile, and through control of the Nazis and the secret police seized absolute power for himself. Immediately he undertook a large-scale rewriting of history to prove that Hitler had never been a hero and had, in fact, been a spy in the employ of Wilhelm.

In one of his frequent changes of line, Goering proceeded to industrialize Germany, not without back-breaking labor on the part of the bewildered peasants, as well as incompetent engineering that almost caused total failure. At last the great hydroelectric plant on the Elbe was finished. Meanwhile Goering ruled by terror, with spy purges (the spies always confessed they were in league with the exiled Hitler) and famine for the peasants and increased privileges for the Nazis.

After a long period of isolation, trade had been resumed with decadent, capitalist England and totalitarian France. In fact, Goering played these mutual enemies off against each other, cleverly executing 180-degree turns in propaganda in order to gain a temporary advantage from one or the other. Finally, however, he was swindled in an alliance with France. For the French hordes invaded Germany, laid waste much of the country, and blew up the great Elbe Dam. They were driven out only at incalculable human cost. Goering, his regime now secure and his vices approximating those of the depraved Wilhelm, gave a tremendous banquet for the English ministers at which each ruling clique swore undying friendship with the other but immediately began to plot new treachery. Goering's subjects, sunk in misery, had almost forgotten the glorious socialist revolution which was to have brought them freedom, plenty, and equality.

ALL this is embarrassing to me, since as a teacher I have for some years been recommending *Animal Farm* to my students. Frequently one of them reports in class on the novel, usually with enthusiasm, for the story of the animals who in their inept innocence try to solve problems that the human race has failed to solve is both humorously and deeply pathetic. All the students except those completely ignorant of modern history recognize that the story parallels the Russian Revolution. Without assistance they identify Napoleon as Stalin, Jones as the Czar, and Frederick as Hitler; if they have ever heard of Trotsky, they recognize him at once as Snowball. Other niceties of Orwell's satire, such as the changes of line, the ban on singing the "Internationale," the rewritings of history, are spotted only by the sophisticated. In all these years, no student has yet come up with the notion that the fable is about either the Nazis or Senator McCarthy (of whom they *have* heard).

Fortunately, if any of my students should ever reproach me for having misled them on the meaning of *Animal Farm*, there will be one or two authorities to whom I can appeal. Delmore Schwartz, in the *New Republic*, does say quite clearly that *Animal Farm* is about Russia, though he thinks the film frequently clumsy and generally unsatisfactory. *Time's* reviewer, too, had by January 17 either heard what was happening or figured the thing out for himself, for he discusses "George Orwell's political fable, the famous animal allegory about Communism." Rose Pelswick, in the *Journal-American* of December 30, begins her review with: "Based on the powerful anti-Communist fable of George Orwell, the picture is an interesting adaptation. . . ." And Alton Cook, in the *World-Telegram and Sun*, says: "If you were attentive to your homework on the book pages back in 1946, you will recall that the novel was a biting satire on the rise of the Communist dictatorship. Animals revolted against their farmer owner and events paralleled the course of the Russian Revolution." Mr. Cook concludes: "The Communists never had it so rough."

It is interesting that three out of these four reviews appeared in "right-wing" publications. Has truth become a luxury no longer available to liberals?

It is interesting also that in the newspaper advertising for the first ten days of the film's run, there were quotations from Crowther, Guernsey, Hale, and Winsten, but not from Pelswick or Cook.

A middle course was taken when it came to Louis Berg, of *This Week*. Back in August 1953, Mr. Berg wrote a piece on *Animal Farm*. It was illustrated with drawings from the film-in-progress, including a marvelous sketch (unfortunately omitted from the finished film) of the Politburo Pigs on the reviewing stand watching their animal slaves march past. Mr. Berg called *Animal Farm* a "devastating satire on Russian Communism," and commended the forthcoming film as a faithful adaptation of the book. Mr. Berg's piece was called "The Fable That Rocked the Kremlin." But the early ads for the film, for example in the *Times* for December 31, read: "'A devastating satire—an important film!' (Berg, *This Week Magazine*)."

AS A matter of fact, the publication and advertising history of the novel *Animal Farm* in this country might have prepared us for the kind of promotion by selective quotation that has been given to the film.

Before its acceptance by Harcourt, Brace and Company, *Animal Farm* was turned down by eighteen or twenty American publishers—notable among them Little, Brown and Company, whose then editor, Angus Cameron, wielded his hatchet on many an anti-Communist book while pushing Howard Fast and Albert E. Kahn. (Equally notable, perhaps, is the publisher who turned it down because "there's no market for animal stories.") When Harcourt, Brace at last published the book, the advertising material on the dust-jacket did not mention Russia or Communism, but proclaimed, instead: "About this little book there is the same kind of reality one concedes to *Alice in Wonderland*." The author of that sentence is like

Homer in one way—in being unable to read.

Of course, one might say, that was in 1946 when we were still in the afterglow of the wartime alliance with Russia and there might still have been a Communist under a bed here and there. However, as it happened, even at that time some of the literary critics were not so nervous as the publishers. *Animal Farm* was a Book of the Month Club selection in August 1946. Harry Scherman, president of the Club, made an almost unprecedented appeal to members not to make use of their substitution privilege that month, and commended to their attention the review by Christopher Morley in the same issue of the Club's *News*. Mr. Morley's review begins: "In a narrative so plain that a child will enjoy it, yet with double meanings as cruel and comic as any great cartoon, George Orwell presents a parable that may rank as one of the great political satires of our anxious time. . . . It is plain enough that the satire is explicitly turned on Russian Communism, yet I also wish that the reader might see in it a parable even larger than that."

The point was made more fully by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., who in the *Times* book section for August 25, 1946, concluded his acute and admiring review thus: "Appreciation of the precision and bite of the satire increases with knowledge of the events in Russia. The steadiness and lucidity of Orwell's merciless wit are reminiscent of Anatole France and even of Swift. The exact and deadpan transposition of the struggle between Stalin and Trotsky, the fight over industrialization, the Moscow trials, the diplomatic shenanigans with Britain and Germany, the NKVD, the resurrection of the state church, and so on, will be a continuing delight to anyone familiar with recent Soviet developments. The story should be read in particular by liberals who still cannot understand how Soviet performance has fallen so far behind Communist professions. *Animal Farm* is a wise, compassionate and illuminating fable for our times."

Now it is 1955, when all America has had the disillusioning lessons of ten years of

postwar experience with the Soviet rulers, and when domestic Communist influence, we understand, no longer exists. So how account for the fact that, when Harcourt, Brace now decides to reissue *Animal Farm* to accompany the film, Mr. Morley and Mr. Schlesinger are quoted on the dust-jacket in curiously adapted versions? On the front cover is the quotation from Christopher Morley: "A parable that may rank as one of the great political satires of our anxious time." Inside the cover is a long quotation from Mr. Scherman, fortunately innocuous but demonstrating that space was not lacking, and the same quotation from Mr. Morley. Then this from Mr. Schlesinger: "A wise, compassionate and illuminating fable for our times. . . . The steadiness and lucidity of Orwell's merciless wit are reminiscent of Anatole France and even of Swift."

This, too, has some of the "reality one concedes to *Alice in Wonderland*."

AM I only trying to stir up a tempest in a samovar? After all, you may ask, what's the harm if the critics see *Animal Farm* as a "universal" satire on all tyrannies everywhere? Anyway, isn't it obvious that the satire applies to Russia? Why labor the obvious?

Well, it is not, as it happens, a "universal" satire. No doubt *Animal Farm* has "universal" implications. So does Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. But *A Modest Proposal* is about British oppression of the Irish peasantry, and *Animal Farm* is about the Bolshevik betrayal of the people of Russia. Do we add to our sense of the "universal" by omitting these facts? If so, then perhaps we might enrich our sense of American history by forgetting the issues involved in the Civil War, omitting the names of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, and remembering only that the war was an example of the eternal aggressiveness of the human spirit.

Can the parable of *Animal Farm* be applied equally to all forms of totalitarianism? My "reinterpretation" of this fable as it would apply to Nazi Germany should, I

think, stand as a sufficient answer. Those who unmention Russia are asking us to believe that so sophisticated an anti-Communist as George Orwell wrote a book in which *by mere accident* every event and every character can be shown to correspond *exactly* to some fact, general or particular, of Soviet history. Moreover, it is clear that the demagoguery in *Animal Farm* can only be the demagoguery of a dictatorship whose origin was egalitarian and pacifist socialism: *Comrade* Napoleon—when was it ever *Comrade* Hitler or *Comrade* Mussolini? The Nazis and Fascists specifically condemned equality and socialism and denounced democracy as corrupt. Only the Communists claimed to be more democratic than anyone else; only to the Communists could one satirically attribute such a slogan as "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others."

As for laboring the obvious: in reviewing a film about Sister Kenny, for example, would critics avoid using the word "polio"? Would they refer instead to "a controversial disease"? Would they find "a clear and unmistakable reference to a scientific problem of interest to every patient and doctor"? Would they commend the film, in spite of defects, as "having something to say about medicine, suffering, and therapy"? Would they fail to mention Sister Kenny by name, and make only elliptical references that might apply as well to Koch or Pasteur? Or, politically speaking, when Chaplin made *The Great Dictator*, did these critics fail to indicate, by outright statement and unambiguous leer, that the butt of Chaplin's satire was Hitler?

Perhaps it is worth mentioning that the Communists themselves seem to know very well what the book is about. Mr. David Platt, in the *Sunday Worker* of January 9, writes: "This list would not be complete

*The Paris Theater has been asked to show, along with *Animal Farm*, the newsreel of the Russian Politburo people at the last December 13 celebration, in which the round-faced, solid-fleshed Soviet leaders looked a good deal like—guess what? Huey Long marches on, but still no Politburo.

without a mention of Louis de Rochemont's feature-length cartoon based on George Orwell's anti-human novel 'Animal Farm' which was intended to frighten people out of any belief in the possibility of social progress. The point of the cartoon was that the overthrow of capitalism can bring only ruin to the world, that a society based on the people's rule carries within it the seeds of its eventual destruction." Mr. Platt, obviously, is not a liberal, and he has given the game away: *Animal Farm* is an attack on Russian Communism.

THIS, however, is not quite the end of our story of the liberal mind's visit to *Animal Farm*. About two weeks after the picture opened, a change took place, not suddenly but yet with fair rapidity. On January 7, there appeared in the ads a quotation from Mr. Cook (but an innocuous one); and Mr. Berg's phrase, "The Fable That Rocked the Kremlin," not only appeared but headed the list of endorsements. And there are other signs that from now on the film will be presented and advertised for what it is—a fable about Russian Communism. On January 16, the ad for the film in the *Sunday Times* was a reprint from the review in *Time*. Apparently someone has discovered that the fable isn't really so "universal" after all.

How was that discovery made? And why did it take so long to make it? Why do people spend three years of painstaking labor on an anti-Communist film only to deny, when the job is finished, that it is anti-Communist? I have no answers to these questions. Advertising is a mysterious business, and liberalism these days seems to be a mysterious business too; when you put the two mysteries together, you get something like the kind of story I have been telling. Perhaps Mr. Crowther, Mr. Guernsey, Mr. Winsten, et al., and Mr. de Rochemont and his associates, might help to clarify what happened and why.

I think the whole story would tickle George Orwell's satiric sense, though no doubt it would also depress him to see how long some people have taken to learn so little.